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Nádas's A Book of Memories and Central European Journeys

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**Volume 14 Issue 5 (December 2012) Article 22**  
**Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek,**  
**"Nádas's A Book of Memories and Central European Journeys"**  
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**Abstract:** In his article "Nádas's A Book of Memories and Central European Journeys" Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek discusses theoretical, literary, political, social, etc., aspects of travel in Péter Nádas's novel. "Travel" in the novel represents both a conceptual and lived experience at a time when travel between the East and the West in Europe was restricted and when a person hailing from the "East" considered a journey to the West a complex and ideological matter. Further, the aspect of urbanity, that is, cultural and social spaces and the journey and what such entails in terms of ideology, points of origin, knowledge, and the individual's perceptions of "locus" are also discussed in the context of Hungarian, East German, and Hungarian Jewish literature. While in today's postcommunist 1989 order of Europe Nádas's text would be read in the context of history, the theme of travel by Hungarians to cities such as Vienna, Paris, Rome, or Berlin has been and remains a prominent genre in Hungarian, as well as Central European literature in general.

## Steven TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK

### Nádas's *A Book of Memories* and Central European Journeys

Péter Nádas is one of contemporary Hungary's acclaimed prose writers (he is also an acclaimed photographer with several exhibitions about Berlin) along Péter Esterházy, Sándor Márai, and Imre Kertész, the latter of whom received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002 (on Esterházy, see Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Cultures, Peripherality"; on Kertész, see Vasvári and Tötösy de Zepetnek). I should like to add that the authors I mention here are such whose work has been translated to English and whose work has been paid attention to in scholarship in English, German, French, Italian, or Spanish. Nádas's novel *Emlékiratok könyve* was published in Hungarian in 1986, near the end of Hungary's period under Soviet and communist rule. Ivan Sanders's and Imre Golstein's translation of the novel with the title *A Book of Memories* was published in 1997 and received much attention and has been compared to Broch, Musil, and Proust in quality and importance in modern fiction (see, e.g., Sonntag). The blurb of advertisement on the jacket of the English translation states that the novel is "with hypnotic attention to sensuous detail conveyed in a prose as lush as it is elegantly precise, Peter Nádas's work is certain to endure both as a brilliant inquiry into the varieties of sexual, artistic, and political passion, and as important moral expression of the public and private soul of twentieth-century Europe." With regard to genre categorization, the designation of the novel by some critics as a "confessional autobiographical novel" poses problems — similar to the problem when Nobel in Literature 2002 Kertész's *Fatelessness* about the Holocaust is read as an autobiographical novel — and Nádas himself rejects the categorization of his novel as "autobiographical novel" the way the genre is understood traditionally: "There is nothing that is not connected somehow with my biography ... But imagination changes things in such a way that it is not biography but rather a biographical sense" (Nádas qtd. in Perlez 1). The novel is a *Bildungsroman* about a Hungarian whose life is narrated by several protagonists about his life in 1950s Hungary and his travels to and experiences in Berlin and East Germany in the 1970s.

Nádas's novel is about travel in a historical context including the political situation of the time but also in a metaphorical context of travel between cultures, ideas, society, as well as gender. In the context of the metaphorical narration of "travel," the novel is imbued with references to culture, that is, as locations and practices of culture in every-day life in general and in the personal and this narration takes place in each case between a Hungarian and East Germans whereby the narrator's point of departure remains anchored in Hungarian culture and the society of the time of the novel. Further, the theme of travel is located within the concept of cosmopolitanism with reference to the capital city Budapest, a city with a population of over two million of the country's total population of ten million. This disproportionate situation determines the capital as the locus of the country's cultural, social, political, economic primacy (and this has been the case since the mid-nineteenth century when the country was, during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, a multi-ethnic state with a population of over twenty million). The capital's socio-cultural significance as a cosmopolitan city is, however, problematic ideologically, culturally, and politically: already during the time of the novel's events the concept of "cosmopolitan(ism)" was used as a reference to the Hungarian Jewry in a negative connotation. Since the end of communist rule, this reference — by left-of-center and right-wing populists but also intellectuals and writers — has been extended to refer to others who are considered "sympathizers of Jews" and, in turn, this state of affairs suggests the virulent anti-Semitic and anti-Other situation of contemporary Hungarian society and politics and (see, e.g., Marsovszky; Tötösy de Zepetnek, "The Anti-Other").

Hungary is a land-locked and small country and thus travel — whether writing metaphorically or about actual travel — is a frequent genre. Thus, Nádas's novel is a continuation of the genre that has been prominent in Hungarian literature since the nineteenth century, namely narratives including all genres of writing about travel and in particular the city (see, e.g., Bán; Kovács; Kőrössi). The historical context of Nádas's novel is Hungary under communist and Soviet rule — 1947 to 1989 — about the life and experiences of a Hungarian youth in Budapest in the 1950s which are narrated by a young Hungarian writer in East Berlin in the 1970s who lives in a *ménage-à-trois* with a German poet and a woman actor. The periods of the novel's events in the 1950s and 1970s are during the time

when the country experienced political, as well as cultural and economic oppression owing to communist ideals and practices. And here is where the notion of travel in its physical connotation is a trope of the novel. During the said period travel was restricted, for example travel to the West was rarely granted to families and normally only one member of the family was allowed to obtain a passport and if/when the person allowed to travel defected, his/her spouse was automatically divorced by the state. The situation was different when it came to travel to socialist "brother" countries including East Germany (in the reverse, Hungary was the preferred location for vacation for East Germans). A good example of the socio-political connotation of travel under communism is this: "Arno Sandstuhl, Thea's husband ... aroused my suspicion, since very few people are permitted to travel from here and most of them know the satisfying feeling of travel only from hearsay, yet he, the privileged writer, had even been to Tibet and Africa if I remember correctly ... of course, while here the travel and its circumstances — of the character Sandstuhl — is related in political terms, the reader would be aware that the far-away places and their exoticism, thus the envy by the narrator, need to be placed in the context of what I referred to previously, namely the Tibet and Africa mean socialist locations where travel was allowed to" (*A Book of Memories* 5).

I connect Nádas's novel to another genre — the memoir — to illustrate the importance of travel and the journey in the metaphorical context and as memory, namely the writings of second-generation Hungarian Jewish women. Briefly, my examples are Julie Salamon's *The Net of Dreams: A Family's Search for a Rightful Place* (1996), Elaine Kalman Naves's *Journey to Vaja: Reconstructing the World of a Hungarian-Jewish Family* (1996), Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (1996), Magda Denes's *Castles Burning: A Child's Life in War* (1997), and Judith Kalman's *The County of Birches* (1998). Salamon's *The Net of Dreams* began by the impetus of reading, in 1993, about Steven Spielberg's plans to film his *Schindler's List* (6) after which she traveled to Poland and other areas of East Central Europe such as Huszt, now in the Ukraine, and formerly a Hungarian town. Salamon's description leading into the history of the mixture of nations is intriguing itself: "This was the land of the *shtetl* — and of Gypsies [Roma in today's terminology], Slovaks, Hungarians, and Ukrainians — an ignorant backwater that had been annexed by the USSR after World War II. Now Communism was finished and the place where my parents were from had been reshuffled again. Their birthplace had lost the status of affiliation with Czechoslovakia or the former Austro-Hungarian Empire" (13). What is significant in this brief excerpt is the reference to Czechoslovakia of the interwar period and the Austro-Hungarian empire (the period prior to 1919) and thus the setting of the notion of Central Europe, geographically and culturally as a multi-ethnic space: the family history of Salamon stretches across Central and East Central Europe in time, in space, and in cultural parameters. It includes the particularities of their education (*Gymnasium*) and university, their knowledge of languages, and the necessities of maneuvering from one cultural context to another but altogether being in a Central European space where they traveled, that is, moved from place to place. Salamon's interpretations and explanations of matters and things Central European cultural and physical spaces — be those Slovak, Hungarian, Ruthenian, Jewish, or Czech — extend over much detail. Salamon's narrative of memory is concentrated on family and family history and the memory of the horror of the Holocaust runs through it. Yet, the Central European cultural space and the re- and dis-locations of the family and the histories of individual members occupy in the book's narrative involve us as readers of a world of "movement" understood metaphorically, as well as physically. Elaine Kalman Naves's *Journey to Vaja: Reconstructing the World of a Hungarian-Jewish Family* is exemplary similar to that of Salomon's text and the history of the family illustrates the migratory nature of Hungarian Jews at the time. Further, the Hungarian Jewish families whose history is told in the book, the Schwarz-Székács, the Weinbergers, the Rochlitz, etc., belonged to that stratum of Jews in Hungary who assimilated and became members of the educated upper-bourgeoisie of the country. In this case, they produced members who were members of the Austro-Hungarian officer corps and upper-government officialdom, landowners, industrialists. One member of the family (Aggie Békés) is also of interest because she earned a doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Debrecen in the 1930s (section of photographs, n.p.). It is well known that Jews in Hungary underwent perhaps the most wide-spread and deepest process of assimilation, for the reason that Kalman Naves describes as "during the forging of Magyar nationalism, they cast their lot

wholeheartedly with that of the emerging Magyar nation — only one of the many ethnic groups in the polyglot Austro-Hungarian Empire which included Slovaks, Ukrainians, Slovenes, and many other nationalities. Even the orthodox among Hungarian Jews described themselves with self-conscious pride as *Magyars* of the Israelite faith" (15) and the access of numerous Jewish-Hungarian families to both non-titled nobility and the ranks of the aristocracy is a particular characteristic of Hungarian history which references the deep-seated nostalgia for the world of Central Europe explains much of the said Central European culture and its Jewish aspects (for the Jewish nobility of Hungary, see McCagg; Lukacs 91-93; see also Molnár and Reszler). In Magda Denes's *Castles Burning: A Child's Life in War* the story of Denes's family is particularly poignant because of her father's act of abandoning his wife and daughter in 1939 and this perspective references, again, the topos of distance and travel. The story of this Hungarian Jewish family, again in the context of its position as educated upper-bourgeoisie, is of particular interest for my argument of Central Europeanness because the story unfolds in "travel." What I mean is the telling of the tale when Magda Denes — after surviving the Holocaust in hiding — flees Hungary in 1946 with her mother and grandmother and how she perceives and experiences life as a refugee with and among all the other nationalities in the refugee camps. The narrative contains much of the self-confidence of the Central European educated, for example, "I always suspected Ervin of having a bit of the prole [proletarian] in him. Anyway, now he wants to emigrate to Palestine with her, and he wants to fight for a Jewish state. I don't even know what that means. Jews are intellectuals, not farmers or soldiers" (147). Magda eventually ends up in New York where she becomes professor of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy at Adelphi University. Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* is similarly bitter-sweet in many instances of her narrative of recollection of Budapest life and death during the war and the Holocaust. The book's title itself is intriguing: *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* and it is similar to Tibor Fischer's (another second-generation Hungarian) *Under the Frog* (1992), in that it contains a translation from the Hungarian. Fischer's un-English *Under the Frog* is a translation of the Hungarian phrase describing when one is in bad circumstances (as in quality of life): *a béka segge alatt* ("under the arse of a frog"). Suleiman's *Motherbook* is a translation of *anyakönyv*, the official name of one's birth certificate in Hungary and a term laden with references of nostalgia and patriotism in Hungarian literature and even in general discourse. Thus, the title of the book sets the scene, the author's search and re-discovery of her Hungarian background and history and this is in itself a "journey" to recapture the past. In the first chapter, "Prologue: Forgetting Budapest," Suleiman describes her escape from Hungary as a ten year old, in the last months when the border was still open to Czechoslovakia. After stops in Košice and Bratislava (Kassa and Pozsony) — the Rubin family of three arrived in Vienna, free. The author then earned a profession and her life with clear distance to her ethnic background in the US-American melting pot. Although with a brief interest in Hungary during the 1956 Revolution and its aftermath of Hungarian refugees in the United States, it is only in the early 1980s — upon the illness of her mother, her own divorce, and the stress of raising two sons as a single mother — that Zsuzsa (the Hungarian version of her name) again takes to Hungary and her unresolved past. After the 1989 Changes, she is invited to Budapest as a guest professor and she spends an extended period in Hungary. In Budapest Suleiman immerses herself in the intellectual life of scholars, writers, and artists and makes many interesting observations. Her descriptions of life and letters in Budapest is valuable for the reader because it is the description of something that does not exist in North America and even in Western European cities it is at best only somewhat similar: it is specifically a Central European situation. Thus, among the many interesting aspects of Central European and, within that, specifically Hungarian scenes, situations, and cultural specifics, some may be of particular interest to the English-speaking North American reader. For example, descriptions and references to the situation of feminism and women runs throughout the book and it reminds me of a situation I was in when giving a paper using feminist criticism at a Hungarian Studies conference in 1991 and where both men and women in the audience attacked my paper saying that feminism is nonsense and inappropriate for the situation in Hungary. Evidently, not much changed in the few years since: Hungary is and remains a profoundly patriarchal society. Another theme in the book is the situation of Jews in Hungary. Suleiman describes the situation with some accuracy and when I was a guest professor in Hungary in 1995 I too found that in Hungary one is either a "Jew-friend" or one is an anti-Semite, there is no in-



between. Interestingly, there is one instance where Suleiman falls prey to that most Hungarian feature, cultural nationalism, despite the fact or perhaps because she is a "traveler" to Hungary: "I felt elated by the beauty of the city. 'It really is a great capital; it really can be compared to Paris.' I told myself as the cable car rose above the river" (47). Overall, it is the cumulative effect of these texts that proves relevant for the argument of the existence of a Central European culture and the importance of space with regard to the capital Budapest, thus the aspect of travel within Hungary and beyond.

Suleiman describes her re-discovery of her "roots," familial and cultural as an intellectual. Apart from the personal and familial, is her emotional and intellectual interest in Hungarian culture. Memoirs by exile and refugee Hungarians have been a frequent type of writing in Hungarian letters, obviously owing to the frequent exodus from a country habitually undergoing foreign invasions. Examples are many, from Prince Rákóczi's (rebel against the Habsburgs) or Count Benyovszky's (king of Madagascar) to the numerous memoirs of refugees after the 1848 Revolution against Habsburg domination and Tsarist intervention and the memoirs by refugees from the White Terror and Admiral Horthy's semi-fascist regime between the two World Wars. The largest exodus of Hungarians occurred after the World War II and after the 1956 Revolution against Soviet and communist domination of the country. The memoirs of this more recent period of Hungarian history are particularly important because these texts published abroad — mainly in English, German, and French — in most cases are of a structure combining personal experiences with cultural descriptions and explanations, explicitly or implicitly and obviously in response to the problem of "Otherness" of Hungarians in Western cultures and languages which they experience in travel.

A further example is Desider Furst's and Lilian R. Furst's *Home Is Somewhere Else: Autobiography in Two Voices* (1994), a dual autobiography. For her book, Lilian Furst edited autobiographical writings her father left her and added her own recollections in some chapters. Desider Furst was born in Hungary, studied dental surgery from 1919 to 1926 at the University of Vienna, became a naturalized Austrian citizen in 1928, and practiced dentistry in Vienna until 1938. He fled Austria with his wife, also a dentist, Dr. Sári Furst-Neufeld and daughter, Lilian, after the German annexation of Austria in 1938 to settle in England. The Fursts, similar to the Salamons and the family of Rubin (Suleiman), had relations all over Central and East Europe, including Poland, Hungary, and Austria. They were educated with active interest in literature, theater, and the arts. Lilian's father and mother both had an M.D. and specialization in dental surgery from the University of Vienna. And their families and relatives suffered the Holocaust everywhere. Yet, Lilian Furst's and Desider Furst's memoirs of their lives and travels the lives of their families are imbued with nostalgia for the lost world that before the Shoah was theirs, a world that their memories recover.

With regard to the topoi of space and movement but now the "lack" of travel in the socialist period of the region — and that in Nádas's novel is mentioned although as per the protagonist's journeys to Berlin is an exception — is Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (1995). In the novel there are many instances descriptions similar to Nádas's novel including aspects of urban life under communism. The German *Wende-Literatur* has been a popular genre following the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example Günter Grass's *Ein weites Feld* (1995), Ingo Schramm's *Fitcher's Blau* (1996), Detlef Opitz's *Klio, ein Wirbel um L.* (1996), Monika Maron's *Animal triste* (1996), or Christa Wolf's *Medea* (1996), although more recently fiction about the communist period keep being published, for example Ingo Schulze's *Adam and Evelyn* (2010), a novel whose theme is the frequent holiday taking of East Germans in Hungary. In Brussig's novel about life in East Berlin references and descriptions such as the Berlin adolescent's yearning for objects and things Western like glossy magazines unavailable in the countries under Soviet hegemony stand out and the flavors of everyday life in East Berlin are no different from those in Budapest or Prague. Brussig's descriptions are similar to Nádas, for example when Nádas writes that "when I had first arrived in Berlin, about two months before ... a room had been rented for me near the Oranienburg Gate ... a tiny sublet on the fifth floor of one of those hopelessly grim, gray, and ancient apartment buildings" (402).

*Emlékiratok könyve* is a narrative about travel under communism with its socio-political connotations in one sense, yet it is also about memory, culture, and the fictional personal and Nádas explains this as follows:

three years have passed, three autumns, and I know I'll never go back to Berlin, there'd be no reason, no one to go to; that's also why I write that it was the last place I lived in Berlin, I just know it was. ... I wanted it to be the last, and it worked out, just happened, that way regardless of my wishes, no matter; and now, nursing an unpleasant head cold I console myself — my mind being useless for anything else, though even in its rheumy state hovering around essential things — by recalling the autumns of Berlin. ... Not that any of it could ever be forgotten. ... That second-floor apartment, for instance, on Steffebauerstrasse. ... Naturally, I've no idea who but I might be interested in any of this. ... Certainly I don't want to write a travel journal; I can describe only what is mine, let's say the story of my loves, but maybe not even that, since I don't think I could ever begin to talk about the larger significance of mere personal experiences, and since I don't believe or, more precisely, don't know, whether there is anything more significant than these otherwise trivial and uninteresting personal experiences (I assume there can't be), I'm ready to compromise: let this writing be a kind of recollection or reminder, something bound up with the pain and pleasure of reminiscence, something one is supposed to write in old age, a foretaste of what I may feel forty years from now, if I live to be seventy-three and can still reminisce. (231).

The cosmopolitan European city — Berlin and Budapest — are the novel's two poles and anchors of their histories and where the events of Nádas's story/stories are taking place and thus the loci of the events represent — whether intended or not — relevant aspects of the novel. In other words, in the context of the time when the novel was written (1973-1985), that is, during the time of travel restrictions in Hungary and East Germany, the narration of the two cities gives us not only the aspect of a specific historical locus but at the same time an entry to these cities before the change of history and society following the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. Nádas demonstrates his interest and attachment to the city — Budapest and Berlin — in many of his other works including *Párhuzamos történetek* (*Parallel Stories*) or as seen in his volume of essays *Fire and Knowledge: Fiction and Essays*. Interesting is that many a section of the text East Berlin is reminiscent of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1995 novel *The Unconsoled*. What I mean is descriptions of urban landscape and in particular of light at night in order to reflect the actual and figurative darkness of life in communist countries. At the same time, for Nádas the cosmopolitan European city "is never the mere fossil of an unclarified past but a surging flow, continually abandoning the stony bed of tradition, solidifying and then flowing on, rolling over decades and centuries, from the past into the future, a continuum of hardened thrusts and ceaseless pulses unaware of its ultimate goal, yet it's this irrepressible, insatiable vitality, often wasteful and avaricious, destructive yet creative, that we call, approvingly or disapprovingly, the inner nature or spirituality of a city's existence" (54). In a translated volume entitled *Fire and Knowledge: Fiction and Essays*, Nádas elaborates on the perspective of the cosmopolitan European city and his thought suggests an interesting turn on what we read in *Emlékiratok könyve*: "there is an even more significant, historically even deeper fault line between the individual peoples, nations, and states of Europe; it runs along the disparity of their levels of urbanization. Sometimes it runs not between individual states but between regions. In Hungary east of the Danube, one lives at a different level of urbanity from that west of the Danube, just as in modern Germany the urban mentality is quite different from that in the south" ("The Citizen" 381).

Last, but not least, an innovative feature *Emlékiratok könyve* is the narration of bisexuality and homosexuality (see, e.g., Gallaway; Perlez), a trope that existed in few cases in Hungarian literature until after the end of communism in 1989 and even today there is little scholarship either in Hungarian or published in other languages about matters gender and what there is, is not mainstream and controversial (in Hungarian-language scholarship, see, e.g., Láczy; in English-language scholarship see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Hungarian"; see also Borgos; Breen Sönser; Horváth; Vasvári; see also Vasvári, Tötösy de Zepetnek, Salzani). My hypothesis is that Nádas's narration of sexuality is a result, precisely, of his experience of travel, thus a "journey" not only in the physical sense, but also metaphorically.

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